



## Conference Paper

# The Timeless Philosophical and Cultural Meanings in Sergei Slonimsky's Operatic Adaptation of *King Lear*

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## Abstract

The focus of this article is the new opera by Sergei Slonimsky, *King Lear*, based on the Shakespeare's tragedy (in Boris Pasternak's translation adopted by the composer himself as a libretto). The opera premiered in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg in 2016. Using this opera as a case study of Shakespeare's adaptation to music, we utilize it to better understand the development trajectory of contemporary Russian musical theater. The goal of this article is to highlight timeless philosophical and cultural meanings of *King Lear* opera through culturological approach. We explore the history of *King Lear* musical adaptations in Russian and global tradition; the approach taken by Sergei Slonimsky; the use of Renaissance and Baroque musical style within the contemporary musical trends; and the interpretation of the main characters of the opera (King Lear, Cordelia, Fool). We come to the conclusion that the new opera synthesizes techniques of high and mass culture, thus allowing the composer to translate timeless philosophical meanings of Shakespeare's tragedy into music in a rich and powerful way.

**Keywords:** opera, drama per musical, composer, tragedy, philosophy, high culture, mass culture, folklore, tradition, innovation

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## 1. Highlights

1. XIXth- and XXth-century musical adaptations of Shakespeare's *King Lear* were mostly either instrumental pieces, or theatrical and movie soundtracks. There are very few operatic versions of the Shakespeare's tragedy (1893 *Re Lear* by the Italian composer A.Cagnoni; *Lear* by the German composer Aribert Reimann (1978); Toshio Hosokawa's 1998 *Vision of Lear*; 2001 Aulis Sallinen's *Kuningas Lear*).
2. Sergei Slonimsky's *King Lear* is the *first Russian opera* based on this Shakespeare tragedy [1]. Slonimsky, who is a patriarch of Russian music representing the Saint-Petersburg school of composition, fearlessly undertook the mission to create his personal vision of *King Lear*.

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3. The novelty of Sergei Slonimsky's approach is the combination of two different types of culture – the high culture and the mass culture – within the operatic genre. This combination serves to explore the timeless meanings of the Shakespeare's tragedy: the opposition and conflict between higher virtues that elevate the people and horrible vices that destroy the world and human character.

## 2. Introduction

The topic of Shakespeare's adaptation to music has been addressed by many foreign and Russian researchers (S. Wells, I.Sollertinsky, G.Otdzhonikidze, S.Bogoyavlensky, D.Zhitomirsky, V.Shestakov, O.Zakharova and many others). Most of these works explore how Shakespeare's plays were adopted to musical works of different ages, styles and genres. In this article, we focus on the new opera *King Lear* by the outstanding Russian composer Sergei Slonimsky, and on its philosophical and cultural meaning. Our goals are: a) to briefly explore the previous musical adaptations of *King Lear*; b) to discuss the underlying meaning of Slonimsky's opera by analyzing its concept, structure and main characters; c) to analyze the general result and the potential of this work of the outstanding modern composer.

## 3. Materials and Methods

The article is based on the culturological methodology which includes a number of methods and approaches: *holistic* approach is used to explore the history of Shakespeare's musical adaptations in global and Russian culture of the past and present; *interdisciplinary approach* is used to interpret the connections between literature and music by using methods of philosophy, culturology, literary criticism, musicology and other fields; *comparative historical approach* allows to reveal dialogical interchanges between Renaissance and Baroque traditions and the present; *culturological approach* helps to discover philosophical and cultural meanings of Slonimsky's opera *King Lear*.

## 4. Results

For a long time, *King Lear* was much less popular among the composers than the other Shakespeare's plays. There are no adaptations of this tragedy either in the XVIIth, or in the XVIIIth century – probably due to an unusually complex philosophical and moral structure of this play, which was in many ways ahead of its time and required new

expressive means that had not yet been developed in the musical culture of that era. In European and Russian culture of the XIXth, XXth and early XXIst centuries, *King Lear* was adapted to music mostly in symphonic form, as well as in the form of theatrical and movie soundtracks (Hector Berlioz's overture *King Lear* (1831), M.Balakirev's music for *King Lear* (1858–1861); D.Shostakovich's soundtrack for M.Kozintsev's movie (1970); theatrical soundtracks for the stage performances of *King Lear* by Yu.Shaporin, A.Khachaturyan, Sh.Chalayev, G.Mayboroda; instrumental piece *King Lear* by Italian composer V.Persiketti (1949); MacBex musical with the music of Jody Trehly, based on *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliette* and *King Lear* (2009)).

In the XIXth century, there were only a few attempts produce an operatic version, none of them fully realized (J.Verdi, P.Mascagni) (Verdi's work on this opera is described in detail in: S.Bogoyavlensky. *Verdi i Shekspir*, S.Bogoyavlensky. *Ital'yanskaya muzyka pervoi poloviny XX veka*, Leningrad: Muzyka, pp.105–140, (1986)). In 1893, Italian composer A.Cagnoni produced an opera *Re Lear*, in a traditional genre of lyrical tragedy (4 acts, libretto by A.Ghislanzoni), with the verismo style music (Cagnoni's opera premiered in 2009 (Martina-Franka)). The most significant example of musical theatrical adaptation of the tragedy in the XXth-century *Lear* (in 2 parts) by the German composer Aribert Reimann, commissioned by the famous baritone singer Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, who premiered in the main part in Munich, 1978. Musicologist M.Muginstein believes that it was inevitable that this opera was composed in the second half of the XXth century, because 'the objective, supra-individual "cosmic" (Reimann) consciousness is more suited to the source text than the individualistic Romantic approach'. We agree with this researcher that "... the Lear's fate both in Shakespeare and Reimann becomes a generalized symbol of existential anxiety and suffering, of the collapse of the world" [4, p. 500].

According to M.Muginstein, "This theme developed by A.Reimann finds its further exploration in the Japanese Toshio Hosokawa's *Vision of Lear* (1998, Munich, Biennial) and Finnish Aulis Sallinen's *Kuningas Lear* (2001, Kaiserslautern)" [4]. In Hosokawa's *Vision of Lear* performed in Moscow (2001, theatric Olympiad, director Tadashi Suzuki), Shakespeare's story had been considerably changed and reworked in the traditions of *noh* theater and postmodern theater. Its meaning is described by the director as follows: "The world is a hospital, and all the men and women are merely patients. I suspect that I am also one of the patients, and Lear is one of the symptoms of my illness" [cit. in 1].

The first Russian operatic adaptation of *King Lear* by Sergei Slonimsky follows an entirely difficult concept. Let us now explore Slonimsky's interpretation and his creative vision of the Shakespeare's tragedy.

What is new and different in Slonimsky's opera is an interaction between two types of culture: the high culture and the mass culture. The first type of culture refers back to the origins of the operatic genre by adopting *dramma per musica* genre of the late XVIth–early XVIIth-centuries. According to the composer, this genre "... is particularly well suited to the Shakespeare's tragedies with their many layers and multiple storylines..." [5]. The second type of culture leads us back to the folk urban and traditional culture of Shakespeare's age, which provides direct parallels with the contemporary mass and popular culture. This interlinking of two contrasting cultural layers allowed the composer to counterpoise sharply the two different worlds: the world of *powers that be* full of contradictions, vices and passions, but also rare examples of nobility, loyalty and love; and the *world of ordinary people* who have their own perception of events, sometimes expressed through the direct participation, sometimes through judgement. To achieve this, the composer effectively utilizes the typical Shakespearean device of a 'play within a play' introducing the spectators of the *Globus* theater into the action. They provide the voices of the mass culture, becoming involved and clear-eyed witnesses and even judges of the characters' actions and the entire sequence of events.

It is also important that this contradiction and even conflict between the two worlds and two cultures is heightened by Slonimsky's introduction of another remarkable character – an ostensibly symbolic figure representing the *Globus* spectators. It is an Old Man who looks like Lev Tolstoy. This character was introduced to recreate a philosophical and cultural polemics between Tolstoy and Shakespeare developed in the Tolstoy's 1903–1904 essay *O Shekspire i drame* ('On Shakespeare and Drama'). The essence of this debate is that Tolstoy denies the inner *truth* of the *King Lear*'s plot and its characters; his contention is that Shakespeare's characters lack linguistic individuality. Tolstoy was particularly opposed to the *secular* quality of this tragedy believing that it lacks a spiritual and religious dimension, which should be an essence of art [6]. Many quotes from this article are included in the libretto of Slonimsky's opera.

Slonimsky's *King Lear* is composed as a *monodic* drama, subtly recreating an internal musical quality of the Shakespeare's tragedy in its melodic interpretation of vocal and instrumental parts (the orchestra is a chamber single-cast orchestra, where instrumental solo parts 'shadow' the main characters revealing the meaning of their words and deeds, as well as their hidden agendas and psychological states). The main characters

of the opera embody human virtues and vices but, despite their Shakespearian typification, they carry their own individual musical vocabulary which makes their images vivid and inspire either sympathy (noble Gloucester, faithful Edgar) or condemnation (scheming and cunning Lear's daughters Regan and Goneril, evil flatterer and liar Edmund). A major achievement is the image of King Lear, which is both psychologically deep and vibrant. The composer convincingly recreates an entire complex array of his emotions and feelings, his moral progress from majesty and despotic power (1<sup>st</sup> act) to madness and deep suffering of a destitute old man (storm scene, 2<sup>nd</sup> act) and to the towering cathartic insight in his final scenes with Cordelia (3<sup>rd</sup> act). The moral center of the opera, after Lear himself, is, of course, Cordelia. Slonimsky imbues her image with a special warmth, tenderness and humanity. Slonimsky has chosen a harp theme as a Cordelia's leitmotif that follows all the heartfelt, melodically beautiful Renaissance-style ariosos of the heroine, imbued with the spirituality and purity. Another expressive character is Fool, with his links to the mass culture whose sources refer to the English song and dance folklore, everyday genres, and the style of instrumental folk music. The Fool's metaphorically laden and ironic remarks and his vivid parody songs accompanied by the sounds of accordion reveal deeper philosophical meanings and references. The musical style of this folk layer refers to the traditions of medieval and Renaissance carnival culture.

## 5. Discussion

The results of our research confirm our hypotheses and require further exploration, both within the history of musical adaptation of Shakespeare's works, and in the area of the development of contemporary music theater.

## 6. Conclusions

In conclusion, we would like to note once more that Slonimsky's *King Lear* is the first Russian operatic adaptation of the Shakespeare's tragedy, which innovatively and originally develops the XIXth-XXth-century tradition of Russian Shakespearean adaptations (by I.Turgenev, N.Leskov, M.Balakirev, D.Shostakovich, etc.). Sergey Slonimsky's *dramma per musica* actualizes and persuasively develops many timeless philosophical universal ideas, accentuates highly relevant for Russian mentality ethical meanings of the Shakespeare's tragedy, condemns evil in all its forms and affirms higher ethical values that are highly relevant in contemporary society.

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